

# THE HIGHEST CRITICISM


A Sermon

BY  
WILLIAM H. LYON, D.D.

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## THE HIGHEST CRITICISM.

“Did not our heart burn within us as he opened to us the Scriptures?” LUKE XXV. 32.

A QUARTER of a century has passed since the Revised Version of the New Testament was issued. The curiosity of the public was intense. Millions of copies were sold, and an American newspaper had the whole translation telegraphed by cable and issued it as an extra. Probably since the earlier years of the Reformation there have not been so many readers of the Bible as there were in 1881.

But, if good people expected as a result of this eager study a marked increase in piety or righteousness, they soon found themselves mistaken. When the public understood that there was no very important change made from the old version, that no great damage and no great good was to be done to the popular theology, they left their Bibles to gather dust again, or to repose, elegantly bound, upon the centre-table in their parlors. Possibly there was a little less superstition about the Scriptures among those to whom the translation was the Bible, and who found that it was not quite perfect; and perhaps some scholarly people discovered that their fresh reading raised some questions that had gone to sleep with the book itself, and began to follow these questions out to their answers. Here and there the translation of certain texts gave a new and higher meaning to them than the old version had given, and led to new sermons upon them. But, on the whole, the attention roused by the new translation soon slept again. There were too many sensations then, as there are now, to give mere literary curiosity any long life, and some new cause of excitement soon replaced this in the common mind.

In the last few years the Bible has again attracted the attention of the reading world. A striking and somewhat

pretentious phrase, "The Higher Criticism," has caught its eye, and fixed it once more upon the ancient book. The word *Criticism* seemed to the general mind a word of hostility, of attack, and that human impulse which makes the multitude run wherever there is news of a fight drove them to the books and the reviews, the lectures and the sermons, that promised to tell them what was going on in the theological arena. It has been hard to explain to them that criticism is a neutral word, that it means simply impartial judgment, like that of scales and yard-sticks, that its object is simply to find out the facts and to brush away ancient and modern prejudice. The popular speech uses the word *criticise* in the sense of to *condemn*, and what was expected by many readers was to see the Bible disproved and discredited, its pretensions unveiled, and its tyranny over human nature forever thrown off. The popular sympathy is generally very largely on the side of the heretics. It has an uneasy suspicion that the theologians and the ministers are taking advantage of its ignorance, and it is apt to welcome any bold come-outer that promises to let them in behind the scenes.

The first of the higher critics were heretics, and they were roundly rebuked by the regulars. But to-day they are the regulars themselves. Things that even Theodore Parker would not have said are written freely and frankly by those who once raged against him. It is not from Harvard Divinity School alone that the new knowledge of the circumstances under which the Bible was written is proclaimed, but also from Yale and Oxford. The leading expounders of the latest view of the Scriptures are Congregationalists and Episcopalians, and those of us who are fortunate enough to have the modifying and refining influence of members of those orthodox bodies among our hearers may be pardoned a little amusement when we find them disturbed by novel views which their own leaders have taught us. In fact, places have sometimes changed, and

there are so-called Liberals who are shocked and antagonized by the rash extremes to which some so-called Conservatives are rushing. How the latter can reconcile their views with the statements of faith which they are supposed to indorse is a mystery to those who look on from the outside, but, on the other hand, no one can fail to respect the courage and frankness with which they have taken up the truth. It certainly is better, since these things must be said, that they should be said by men of reverence and restraint, not only by sensational writers and by lecturers whose chief aim is to tickle the mob.

Now one consequence of all this agitation is to revive again the interest in the Bible. Like the announcement of the revision, the rumor of the rearrangement of the Bible has called back the wandering mind of the public to that neglected book. It is a deeper and a healthier attention, and it will last longer. For what calls it out is not a finished fact, like the revision, to be judged all at once, but a process that began many years ago and will last many years yet. And it will grow in interest as it goes on, since it will come to questions of greater importance than any it has already settled. It will hold the respect of thoughtful people, too, because what it has done already has been so universally accepted by scholars of all communions. The rearrangement of the Old Testament is regarded by practically all learned men in that line of study as forever settled, whatever ministers, for whatever reason, may continue to say to their hearers. So, while good men shrink a little, as at the thought of a necessary operation upon some loved member of their family, before the fearless yet reverent advance of the new learning upon the New Testament, the common feeling is that which ought to be held toward surgeons who have proved their skill and trustworthiness in previous operations. The truth is hard to hear, sometimes, but it is the only thing that in the long run it pays to hear.

But this interest, like the other, will die out at last, with very much the same results. It is a literary curiosity, not religious, and when it is satisfied, or when it finds some new subject to run after, it will fade away. As before, the superstitious use of the Bible will receive a shock, and will change in many cases to utter unbelief and neglect. In general, the unintelligent and indiscriminating reader, who has been accustomed to think that the Scriptures need no intelligence in the reading, that one chapter is as good as another so long as it is in the Bible, will find his interest much less. It is possible, too, that some really pious people, who have rested their faith in the great religious verities upon the infallible text of the sacred book, will be greatly disturbed and even unsettled by finding that all is not as they thought.

It is this last class alone that needs to be considered, the truly earnest and religious, and to them it should be said that there is a kind of criticism of the Bible that is much higher than either the translation or the sifting of the various books. There is a point of view from which the question of who wrote its books or when they were written vanishes entirely. The value of any passage for its best purpose never depended upon these things, and is not affected by the opinion of learned men upon them. Religion is not a matter of time or place. The question of right and wrong is not to be settled by mere scholars. The Bible is a record of spiritual experience, and, if the experience is real, it speaks to the soul that is ready for it, no matter how many centuries or thousands of miles lie between. There is a higher criticism than that which is so called. Let us name it the Highest Criticism, and let us note that it has always been in the world, is not in the least injured by anything that scholars have done, and may be exercised by any one who has a soul, whatever learning he has or may not have.

The Highest Criticism, what is it? It is the recognition of life by life. It is the answer of soul to soul. It is the

echo of experience in experience. Take the Twenty-third Psalm, for instance. We are told now that David did not write it. At first this seems to take the value out of it. We had always thought of David, the shepherd lad, writing among his sheep, in the green pastures and by the still waters, with his rod and his staff by his side, or as leading his flock through some dark ravine that seemed like the valley of the shadow of death. To be told that the psalm is later than he lived, and that it was composed by some unknown singer, seems to drain the sweetness from it. The case is not helped by looking up David's record, and finding that he was really not a very spiritually-minded man, and that, perhaps, it is just as well that he did not write the beloved psalm. It remains anonymous. It has no historical or personal association. It floats down the centuries like a sweet odor from an unseen flower or a strain of music from an instrument invisible and unknown.

But is the odor any less sweet or the music any less refreshing because we do not know whence it comes? Or would it be any sweeter if we could find the flower or trace the notes back to the instrument? We should have an addition to our stock of knowledge. Our curiosity would be satisfied. Our inborn and inextinguishable desire for facts would be pleased. But this is a different part of our nature, and perhaps a lower one than the love of odors and of music. Less valuable, too, for we should be poorer to find the instrument and never hear the music than to hear the music and never know whence it came.

So there is a power in us to appreciate spiritual beauty or moral truth which is quite distinct from either the love of persons or the ability to reason. It is the power of experience, or of the refinement which experience has produced, to recognize that which is like itself or that which it needs to make it better. I knew a most loving couple who had come to that supreme moment when death was gliding between them.

The husband's life was ebbing out fast, and there were but a few moments of communion left to them. The temporal affairs were settled, and then husband and wife joined hands and repeated this Twenty-third Psalm. It was very soothing and consoling, the wife told me; but why was it so? Was it because David wrote it? Would it have been any less so if some one had stepped in to say that he had found that nobody knew who wrote it? As well might one say that the sweetness of the rose depended upon its name, or the beauty of a symphony upon our knowing who composed it. These would be interesting facts, but they lie upon an entirely different and lower level than that of the appreciation of the thing itself. The sweetness of the rose depends upon its power to be sweet and upon the power of the passer-by to perceive it. The beauty of the symphony depends upon the music in the soul of the composer and the music in the soul of the hearer. It would be interesting to know the biography of the composer and the history of the writing of the symphony. It would be very satisfying to be able to analyze the whole production, to watch the working out of the themes, and to learn the general theory of symphonic composition. But a man might know all these pleasant things and yet never enter into the spirit of the music. The programme tells many good people all about the symphony, and we see some of them reading the programme instead of listening to the music. This higher criticism is very interesting to them, and, if one may judge by the expression or lack of expression on their faces, that is as far as they can go. The music in them does not rise to greet the music that comes to them. The higher criticism they have. The highest criticism they have not, and they cannot have it till their musical appreciation has risen nearer to the level of the composer.

To many a husband and wife it may well be impossible for the spiritual experience of that unknown poet who wrote the Twenty-third Psalm to appeal. They have no ex-



perience of their own, no such ability of soul to answer to soul as gave the real consolation of that solemn time. They might repeat the lines as a sort of sacrament, incantation, mysterious charm against the power of death,—a not uncommon way of repeating Scripture,—but of real comfort, of stay to a sinking heart, of antidote to the dread of the unknown, there could be none. That Highest Criticism which is the power to appreciate and answer to spiritual beauty and power would not be in them.

Or let us move on to the New Testament. The Higher Criticism is at work here, and the results are likely to be very startling. It is unpleasant to be assured that Matthew did not write the First Gospel, nor John the Fourth. It is disturbing to have some of the main facts in the story of Jesus brought into doubt. The historic foundations of Christianity are likely to be seriously shaken. Those who have built their faith upon events and persons may be troubled by the results of what is called the Higher Criticism.

But not those who are capable of that Highest Criticism which is the answer of spiritual experience to the spiritual appeal of Jesus. He says, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." Now there are thousands of persons who believe that Jesus said these words, but do not believe in the words. Faith in Christ is very easy so long as it means believing about him, but when it comes to believing in him as we do in a wise friend, or a friend in whose character we have confidence, they are not to be found. They do not love their enemies, and they by no means pray for those that use them badly. There are multitudes of this kind of Christians, whose souls do not answer to the appeal of the Christian life. The biography of Christ they believe in with their minds, and this belief gives them a sense of security here and for the hereafter. But the life of Christ which alone gives the biography of Christ any value does not come home to them as a reality.

Such people are likely to be seriously disturbed by the results of the Higher Criticism, because its field of work is exactly their field of belief. But the man who believes in the life of Christ as a spiritual condition, and not merely as a series of events, will not be troubled by scholarly investigations. There is that in his heart that answers to the teachings of his Master and to that illustration of them which he gave on the cross. His is the power of the Highest Criticism, which deals not with the things of time, but with the things of eternity. It may or may not be possible for him to carry out the Christian ideal among the circumstances and practices of to-day, but he realizes that it is the ideal toward which human life must climb, and he recognizes his Master in the beauty and the power of whoever lifted it before him. The claim of Jesus to the loyalty of the world will lie less and less in his miracles as the world grows more and more able to appreciate him, and to those who can appreciate him the authorship of the Gospels will be no more essential than that of Hamlet.

Let us take two illustrations more of this Highest Criticism. Toward the end of the Book of Deuteronomy is a chapter that contains what is styled the Blessing of Moses. He calls the twelve tribes of Israel before him one by one, and gives them his benediction. It is a chapter which is very interesting to the archæologist. The higher critic reads it eagerly for its information on the history of Israel. But to the ordinary reader it is very uninteresting. The tribes of Israel are gone, and some of their history can well be spared. The Thummin and Urim of Levi and the leap of Dan from Bashan do not seem to concern us. But suddenly the reader comes upon a sentence that makes his heart leap,—“The eternal God is thy dwelling-place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” That sentence is like a chink through time into eternity, through human history into the divine love and peace. The wise reader takes it away from its dull context. He does not care whether Moses said it or not. He leaves

the scholars to settle the question. But that thought of God as our home and our hiding-place in time of trouble belongs to him. He sets it in his funeral service, and keeps it for all the other hard and trying times of his life.

There is an instance of the use of the Bible which the Higher Criticism cannot affect. It illustrates the use which the Bible will more and more serve as men grow more spiritual. We have this treasure in earthen vessels, and it will stay with us when the vessels in which it was saved for us have been broken and thrown away. In older days, readers hung with wonder upon stories of miracle, or traced the story of their favorite heroes through strange adventures. So the child still does. Every Sunday-school teacher knows how much easier it is to interest his class in the Old Testament than in the New, in story than in precept. But, when men and women come to know life, when their spiritual needs develop and their spiritual senses have been sharpened by the ripening of the soul, it is the springs of life by which they stop and drink.

Here are the Epistles to the Corinthians. How much in them is of time, belongs to conditions that are past! What have we to do with meats offered to idols, with discerning of spirits and interpretation of tongues? But suddenly, as when a stony road becomes soft and smooth, and winds among trees and meadows, we find ourselves reading, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." The great councils that formulated the creeds did not care for this, nor did our fathers when they were busy quarrying out doctrines from the Book which was to them all alike divine. There is nothing here that gives the higher critic a clew to author or date, to age or circumstances. This is the spiritual life that knows no time or surrounding, but is eternal in its truth. It requires no proof, no "evidences of Christianity." It is of God and for man.

The Higher Criticism, then, deals with persons and dates,—

the mere instruments and shells of the divine revelation. The Highest Criticism deals with the revelation itself, the divine truth and life that shine through times and circumstances, and that lie, in books as in the world, among dull details and unessential conditions, as the diamond lies in the clay. The real question is not Who wrote it, but What does it say to me? In that beautiful story of the walk to Emmaus the disciples reproached themselves with having failed to notice, not whether the stranger who had spoken to them was a man in authority, but that their heart burned within them as he talked with them by the way and opened to them the Scriptures.